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ABSTRACT

A study compared the perceptions of two experts from different cultural backgrounds concerning salience of a variety of errors typical of the English written by Hong Kong secondary and college students. A book on English error types written by a Hong-Kong born, fluent Chinese-English bilingual linguist was analyzed for its emphases, and a list of salient error types was created for comparison. Differences in error categorization (sometimes too broad or superficial, sometimes too specific) and major disparities in emphasis were found. The native speaker's list of error types featured tenses, modals, preposition, and connectives much more prominently and featured comparatives, determiners, concord, and some sentence structure problems less prominently. Ideas of which comparatives to include differed: the non-native speaker's work focused on usage details of individual items, while the native speaker's interest was in entire constructions in which a range of errors may appear. Only 14 of the native speaker's 96 specific entries, and 3 marginal entries, were also on the non-native speaker's list. Those entries are examined in greater detail. It is proposed that this comparison provides evidence of disparity in intuition, and suggests that development of a standard for error correction is desirable. (MSE)

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ERRORS IN FOCUS?

Native and non-native perceptions of error salience in Hong Kong student English - a case study

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to compare the perceptions of two expert judges from crucially different backgrounds in respect of the relative salience of a range of local errors (if this is indeed their status) typical of the English written by secondary and tertiary students in Hong Kong. The perceptions involved seem to differ substantially.

Differences of this kind obviously have very serious implications for the focus of remedial English courses and of books designed to help local students in the task of 'improving' their English (i.e., rendering it closer to the exonormative - chiefly British - standard). Local usage is as different as it is from this standard for a number of reasons, but one important reason lies in the fact that in Hong Kong most secondary school teachers and many tertiary teachers are themselves ethnic Chinese, and are in very many cases seriously mis-informed as to the status of grammatical and lexical features (see Newbrook (1988)). Their teaching (and the example provided by their own usage) is thus often misleading to students. By the time they reach tertiary level, many students feel able to 'correct' a range of what they perceive as local errors with a considerable amount of confidence; but most of them, in fact, typically fail to spot many genuinely non-standard features of the texts in question, and attempt to 'correct' other features which are already standard (Newbrook, *op. cit.; cf* Gupta (1986:81) on similar phenomena in Singapore).

Since the goal adopted remains the exonormative standard, much remedial work is often needed if students' usage is to approximate the norm; hence the concern in some circles over this matter, and the wide sales of various books, some produced locally (*e.g.*, Chiu (1983)) and some in the People's Republic of China, which aim to enlighten readers on this front. Some of these books are written in English and some (P.R.C. works especially) in Chinese. Many of these books, notably some of the latter group, are themselves seriously misleading, and the need for authoritative information as to just what is and is not standard usage remains largely unsatisfied. Classroom contact with native speakers, which often begins only at tertiary level, brings many students to a realisation (in many cases accompanied by a shock) of just how 'deviant' their English in fact is; and the urgency of the drive towards the avoidance of error is thus intensified (especially for those majoring in English, etc). The demand for books of this kind is therefore still high (perhaps higher) at this level.

Errors of Hong Kong learners: two recent books

Tse (1988) is one of the most recent works to have been produced by a fluent non-native user of English for Hong Kong readership. The body of the book is written in Chinese, and hence the work is rather more accessible to students than it would be if it were in English. It has only 135 pages, and deals with 90 grammatical errors, divided into 9 categories ('Gerunds', etc) with 10 errors in each. There is, of course, no guarantee that the range of really important errors found can be divided into ten categories of this kind such that there is an equal number in each category; indeed, the rigidity of this 9 x 10 format may have forced Tse to include some errors which he perceived as less important and/or to exclude others which were more important than these.

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2

However, we can be confident that Tse perceived these 90 errors as at least amongst the most important ones made by Hong Kong students - perhaps all 90 would be amongst the leading 150 or so.

Tse is Hong Kong born, and studied at postgraduate level at the University of Leeds in England. He is a fluent Cantonese-English bilingual, and is obviously fully literate in both written codes. In my judgment his spoken English in particular is of a very high standard indeed, and his sensitivity to the errors made by local students seems to be exceptional for a non-native speaker. When the book was published Tse was Lecturer in Translation at the City Polytechnic of Hong Kong, teaching, among other subjects, the structure of English.

Tse announces in his introduction (no page number) that his book is intended mainly to help students who are studying for the Hong Kong Certificate examination in English, but could also be used by other students. He selected the 90 error-types on the basis of his wide experience of Hong Kong secondary school English.

Another work on the same theme which was about to reach the market when Tse (1988) appeared is Newbrook (fc). This is a much larger work, consisting of two students' volumes of around 150 pages each, plus separate keys. The total number of error-types covered is also much greater, even discounting those which do not involve grammar but rather lexis, etc. There is no constraint on error selection such as Tse's 9 x 10 format. The book is aimed at roughly the same kind of audience, though the fact that it is written in English and includes (particularly in the second volume) some more subtle and complex errors makes parts of it at least more accessible to older students.

I am a native speaker of British English, with an academic background in dialectology and the structure of English. I worked in Hong Kong (City Polytechnic and Chinese University) from 1986 to 1989, after a period in Singapore, and am obviously very familiar with the range of errors made by students, as a result of going through the task of compiling my own book. Although I am not a Sinologist, I am sufficiently familiar with the structure of Chinese to recognise and understand most relevant L1 interference effects (syntactic). Tse at one time served as tutor on my courses, and may have been influenced by me in respect of his perceptions of errors; but his book was compiled before any such influence could have taken effect.

The Study

When I looked through Tse (1988), my immediate impression was that, while all the errors listed were salient enough, and indeed were covered in Newbrook (fc), I would have made a rather different selection had I been restricted to 90 or 100 errors only. I therefore decided to compile a list of what were in my view the most salient of all of my larger group of errors, numbering approximately the same as Tse's. I then compared the two lists, noting that, as mentioned above, Tse was constrained to some extent by his format in respect of his selection. In order to avoid undue interference in my judgment (in either direction) from my study of Tse's book, I did not carry out this study until two months after looking at the work, and did not open it in the interim. By the time I compiled my list I had virtually no memory of the detailed contents of Tse's book.

Constraints on the study

In addition to the constraints of Tse's format, there are other factors which might distort the comparison between Tse's book and my list. As noted, Tse's audience, by and large, is probably intended to be younger, less sophisticated and less competent in English. However, the errors listed by Tse certainly persist in the usage of tertiary students, and the book would thus be

of almost as much help to them as to younger users. If this is how the potential users themselves perceive their needs (and this is not necessarily the case), and if Tse had these perceptions in mind in writing, this difference is perhaps not very important.

Another type of difference might involve divergent perceptions on the part of Tse and myself as to what would qualify as an error for inclusion. My own view is that such a short list must contain only those variables which are:

a) common to the writing and speech of many (preferably most) local students; and

b) especially damaging to interaction with non-Hong Kong people, through either:

   i) being stigmatised in the English-using community at large, or:

   ii) being likely to cause misunderstanding or failure of understanding on the part of non-Hong Kong readers/interlocutors (or, in reading and listening, of the student herself)

I take it that the international character of English is at the centre of Hong Kong's need for the language - it is very seldom spoken in all-local groups in Hong Kong, although it is true that it is used in local business documents, etc - and that, despite the largely 'instrumental' and non-integrative motives for learning English, this factor makes conformity with international norms (rather than with uncodified local pseudo-norms) the desirable target of teaching.

It is possible that Tse, in compiling his book, did not perceive the relative significance of the various errors in the same terms. For instance, his weighting of the relative importance of stigmatisation and misunderstanding/failure of understanding might be different from mine (I perceive these two factors as approximately equal in weight). However, such matters are hard to quantify, and in any case I have no reason to suppose (on the strength of earlier and more recent discussions with Tse) that there is any serious divergence of this nature in respect of our views of the issue.

As noted, the actual means of selection, methodologically speaking, were apparently the same in the two cases; reliance on prolonged personal experience. It is, however, possible that some of the disparities relate to the fact that my experience has been very largely of tertiary (though for the most part sub-degree) rather than secondary students' work; but I do not think that the actual differences between our lists could readily be explained in these terms.

Another difference might lie in Tse's occasionally not realising that some feature of local usage is in fact local only, and hence to be regarded, given the above, as an error. Tse is so proficient in English and so knowledgeable about it that this could only rarely occur, though it might conceivably have been responsible for some omissions. In any case, if this should be the case, it would be better to regard it as part of the focus of this study rather than as a distorting factor. If Tse himself were not aware that a piece of usage was only local, this could be seen as an extreme instance of the more likely kind of case in which he knew about it but did not feel that it was sufficiently important to include (contrary to my own judgment).

It should be noted at the outset that in no case does Tse recommend usage which itself appears to be, in fact, non-standard. In a few cases he does identify as 'incorrect' usage which appears to be standard (though in some cases relatively informal). Examples of this latter include IV.3 and, apparently, II.3. These two problems loom very much larger in the work of some other local writers on errors in English.

Selection of error-types from Newbrook (fc)

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I eventually selected 96 error-types as being more or less indispensable to any book, however short, for use in Hong Kong. As will become clear, these error-types were not always directly comparable with those listed by Tse, but it would have been impossible to eliminate the possibility of this kind of disparity and at the same time still avoid experiencing influence arising from awareness of Tse's selection. Despite the disparity, some comparison can be made. My 96 error-types broke down as shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Numbers of common errors by category: derived from Newbrook (fc)

Parts of speech confused	1	Modals	9
Nouns - basics	2	Verb voice	2
Determiners, etc	7	Concord	1
Pronouns and relatives	7	Prepositions	21
Comparatives, etc	5	Connectives/short adverbials	13
Verb-forms	3	Sentence structure	15
Tenses	6	Time expressions	4

Some of these entries (e.g., that for 'Concord') cover quite a range of more specific manifestations of error; but no entry covers a whole topic area. For instance, 'Concord' here covers a number of more specfic variants on the one basic error, but does not include every type of error involving concord.

Comparison with Tse (1988): *1. Differences in categorisation*

This breakdown should now be compared with Tse's. However, we must first note that Tse's categories and individual entries are not always of the same types as mine. In the case of the individual entries, as noted above, this effect interferes to some extent with our attempts at comparing the two selections. Tse's system differs from mine most obviously in the following respects:

i) The categories are in some cases rather broad, or relate to rather superficial features of the construction (e.g., a varied group of errors is classified together under 'Adjectives' simply because an adjective normally appears somewhere in each of the relevant constructions); in certain cases the nomenclature is even slightly misleading. I have therefore reorganised Tse's list on lines similar to my own.

ii) More seriously: Tse's individual entries, on the other hand, are often more specific than mine, and in some cases perhaps too specific. Many of them relate, as it seems, to individual lexical items (not themselves part of the grammatical apparatus) rather than to structurally-defined sets of items; in a number of cases the same error is included separately for different items which can co-occur with it in more or less exactly parallel ways. For instance, Tse's entries I.7, II.1 and II.4 are all basically variants on the same error, the redundant use of adverbial *-ly*. Elsewhere, perhaps with more justification, Tse

makes very fine distinctions within what I have regarded as essentially unitary phenomena (e.g., in entries III.1, III.3, III.4, III.6, etc under 'Concord'). The three entries listed above under 'redundant use of *-ly*', together with entries I.6, II.8 etc, are also all examples of part-of-speech confusion, which I again treated (perhaps wrongly) as a basically unitary phenomenon. It is thus hard to compare the lists directly, and different totals have to be given for the two works where a feature is shared (Tse will have, say, 3 or 4 entries 'shared', whereas in terms of my broader individual entries this will amount to only one).

Tse's list of 90 errors can be broken down as in Table 2:

Table 2: Numbers of common errors by category, derived from Tse (1988)

Parts of speech confused	7	Modals	1
Nouns - basics	10	Verb voice	1
Determiners, etc	11	Concord	10
Pronouns and relatives	4	Connectives	1
Comparatives, etc	11	Sentence structure	1
Verb-forms	5	Time expressions	2

Note that 'sentence structure' here includes several word-order phenomena.

2. *Major disparities*

If we compare the two breakdowns, we note the following major disparities:

a) Tenses, modals, prepositions and connectives are much more prominent in my list. In all four cases, particularly the first three, Tse's relative lack of focus seems strange, given the high level of divergence in local usage which obtains in these areas and the notoriety of many of the individual errors.

b) Comparatives, determiners, concord and assorted types of sentence structure problems are apparently more prominent in Tse's book. However, a simple count disguises the fact that in some cases several of Tse's entries, as noted, correspond with only one of my entries. This applies in the case of concord, and also in that of sentence structure in so far as this involves complement structures after verbs. (As stated above, in neither case was my own entry all-encompassing or intended to cover an entire major topic area, though in the case of complement structures after verbs it was certainly much broader than Tse's equivalent entries).

c) As far as comparatives are concerned, it is interesting that Tse's longer list still omits some other errors of this kind which narrowly failed to appear on my own list. Although we both perceive this area as important, our ideas about which particular phenomena deserve the most attention are clearly rather different (see also below). The same is true to some extent in respect of determiners, where Tse's focus is upon matters of more restricted scope such as descriptive proper names (*(the) United States*, etc) and the small group of words, including *prison*, etc, which have a special use without *the*. My focus is rather

upon more general errors in this area (see d) below). However, there is also, once again, an associated tendency for several of Tse's entries to relate to one of mine.

d) In general, Tse is concerned, as noted, with the details of the usage of individual items, whereas I am more concerned with entire constructions in which a range of items may appear. We have seen that this hinders comparisons between the two lists, but it is also of considerable interest in itself, since it is, I think, not unusual; other books written by Hong Kong Chinese on this theme, such as Chiu *op. cit.*, also devote much more space than mine to topics such as the exact choice of preposition, particle etc to be used with each of a list of particular verbs (and often organise this body of facts in a rather unsystematic way). Specific errors of this type are, in fact, among the hardest of all errors to avoid, since the absence (for the most part) of reliable general rules means that the learner has to absorb and retain separately each specific rule, and cannot generalise with any guarantee of success. In addition, it is not clear that there is such a great deal of urgency about mastering the standard usage in these cases, since - with a few exceptions such as the choice of preposition after bias, etc - the local usage is still intelligible (though it is often perceived as very odd), and since errors in this arbitrary and unsystematic part of the grammar will be more readily forgiven (at least by more sophisticated readers and listeners). It must be observed that this disparity is manifested here despite the fact that my own list itself exhibits to some extent - in those areas where generalisation seems impossible but where the errors are still very salient - the particularising tendency which I have here characterised as predominantly local, notably by including so many individual entries for prepositions.

3. Entries in common

We turn now to an examination of the particular entries shared by the two lists. Of my 96 entries only 14 are shared with Tse, with 3 more 'borderline cases'. These correspond with 36 (+ 3) of Tse's entries. It will be noted that even using Tse's entries the percentage is well under 50 - taking the doubtful cases as halves, the figure is in fact 43%. In terms of my entries the same calculation yields 16%. In either case, but - obviously - especially in the latter, the degree of overlap seems alarmingly low.

It may be felt that my broader categories have forced the second percentage figure down to an unnaturally low level - in other words, that I have (inadvertently) 'cheated'. I would dispute this, since in at least some of these cases Tse seems to have artificially created additional error-types by including variants of a construction which differ only in respect of the particular lexical item involved rather than in terms of any structural parameters.

However, in order to redress the balance, I have looked again at all the cases where two or more entries from Tse (1988) collectively correspond to one of my 14 (+ 3) entries. This applies to 6 of my 14 (but to none of the border-line 3) - 28 of Tse's 36 entries correspond to these 6 (the remaining 8 of these 36 correspond to my remaining 8 on a one-to-one basis). Of these 28, I would include at most only 10 (I.3, I.10, III.1, III.6, VI.2, VIII.3, IX.2, IX.3, IX.7 and IX.9) in a list of 90 or 100 selected at Tse's level of lexically-based specificity. I assume further that approximately half of my previous selections would have to be omitted from a list compiled on such a revised basis. I allow for this by adding half of the remaining 8 cases, where Tse and I do exhibit one-to-one correspondence, plus a quarter mark for each of the borderline 3. This yields a total of 14.75, which is virtually the same as the figure of 15.50 originally arrived at (slightly lower, even). Even if I assume that all 8 + 3 of these previous selections would remain (unlikely), the total is only 19.50, yielding a percentage overlap of 19.5 - 21.7 or so across my selection.

I conclude that there is indeed remarkably little agreement between Tse and myself in respect of what should be emphasised in short treatments of this nature.

It may be worth listing here the 14 + 3 shared errors, according to my original listing: please refer to Figure 1.

Figure 1: Errors identified as common by both Tse (1988) and Newbrook (this paper)

Fig. 1a: Main 14 cases

Tse number(s)	Description	Example
I.3, IX.1-3, IX.5-10	Complement structure	Capable *to do*, spend a day *to revise*, prevent *someone to enter*, succeed *to enter*
I.5	Active/passive, etc	*Determine* for *are determined*
I.6, I.7, II.1, II.4, II.8	Part of speech confusion	She looked healthily
I.10, V.3	Raising to subject	*We are necessary* to ...
II.2	Positive *too*	I did not go *too*
II.10	*Before* for ago	It happened two days *before* (= 'before NOW')
III.1, III.3-4, !II.6	Concord	X as well as Y *were* hurt Reading stories *are* fun
IV.9	Double comparative	*More easier*
V.9	*All/both + not*	*All are not interested* (= 'none are interested')
V.10	Question word order	I don't know what *is he* talking about
VI.2, VI.6, VI.8	Uncountable nouns	*Homeworks*
VII.1	No article with nominal adjectives	*British* are friendly
VII.3	No article with generic singulars	*Cow* is useful
VIII.3-4, VIII.6 VIII.8	Confusion of *-ing* and *-ed*	I feel *boring*

(Fig. 1 continued)

Fig. 1b: Marginal 3 cases

Tse number(s)	Description	Example
II.5	*Very/too* X *that*	The sea was *very/too* rough *that* the ferry was cancelled
(Tse gives *very*, my list has *too*; both occur, of course)		
VIII.1	*Comparing/compared*	*Comparing to Singapore*
(Tse recommends *compared to* in sentence-initial position; I discuss such cases as part of a recommendation to avoid the entire construction after a comparative)		
VIII.9	Subject relative deletion	Anyone *is caught* will be charged
(Tse gives one example which suggests that his main focus is not in fact upon the relative clause environment; in my view, this is at the very least much the most crucial locus of this error)		

Discussion

It does not, of course, follow from their inclusion by two writers from such disparate backgrounds that these 14/36 + 3 cases are to be regarded as the most serious (or even as amongst the most serious) errors to be found in Hong Kong student usage. Nevertheless, the fact that they appear in both lists despite the overall lack of agreement between the lists must surely mean something, and all of these cases (except perhaps for the marginal case of II.5 - and quite possibly even that) do indeed appear to qualify extremely well in terms of the criteria for inclusion in treatments of this length which I set out above. Tse's selection of cases such as V.10 is of particular interest, since only a vanishingly small percentage of Hong Kong students - or even of their teachers and lecturers - realise that their usage is unusual at this point. It would appear that such features are indeed perceived as highly salient by those few unusually well-informed Hong Kong commentators who are in fact aware of them.

Having said this, one must admit that there are many other errors which at least some writers might find equally worthy of inclusion but which have been selected in only one (or in neither) of these two lists. Errors which strike me as absolutely essential to list, but which Tse omits, include (in addition to common 'careless' errors such asomission of the *-s* and *-ed* endings):

1) the use of 'Chinese *those*'

2) the use of *it* without any (identifiable) antecedent

3) overextended use of modal *would*

4) overextended use of past perfect *had*

5) confusion of *used to* and *be used to*

6) use of pseudo-present *use to*

7) omission of *if* after *even*

8) confusion of *on the other hand* and *on the contrary*

9) the local use of *later* which is analogous to the use of *before* included by Tse under II.10.

Other commentators may, of course, have still other perceptions. Perhaps works of this kind should be written by committees rather than by individual scholars (local or expatriate).

It may be said that it is not surprising that there is so little agreement between the lists selected by these two writers, given their disparate backgrounds. On the other hand, Tse's obviously fruitful sojourn in the U.K. - added to his unusually successful experiences earlier as a learner of English - and my three years spent in a deluge of Hong Kong speech and writing might have been expected to level off the disparities to a greater extent than appears to have in fact happened. It is certainly striking that two scholars who have been exposed - in theory at least - to the same norm should have reached positions so far removed from each other.

Unfortunately, the upshots of this disparity are potentially very serious, and from an educator's point of view these are obviously much more important than whatever explanations may be offered for such divergence. It seems unlikely that many other locally born writers will develop intuitions much closer to those of native-speaker experts than has Tse; which is to say that - always assuming that neither Tse nor I am in any crucial way atypical of our respective (very select) groups in respect of our intuitions and priorities in this area - most work produced locally will be even further 'off-target' vis-a-vis native-speaker intuitions.

Conclusions

The scale and character of this disparity in respect of intuitions forces educators to consider very clearly what their goals and purposes are in teaching English, and, more specifically, in choosing which 'errors' to correct.

If, as I have suggested, the goal for Hong Kong is the exonormative standard, with a view to contacts with native speakers and with non-native speakers from elsewhere, also adherents of this standard; and if it is thought that this is in some sense a relevant and feasible goal, given the Hong Kong situation; it follows that the intuitions of local experts should be made the basis of recommendations only in so far as these agree with those of experts who are members of the norm-providing community - these latter are, of course, mostly native speakers. But it seems likely, on the present evidence, that very few, if any, local experts, even those whose own English is largely error-free, will have the 'right' intuitions about precisely which errors will be perceived as salient by interlocutors or readers from elsewhere (from the U.K., the U.S.A., etc in particular), and hence are suitable for foregrounding in remedial training and in books such as Tse (1988). Even when these scholars' own usage is more or less standard, it appears that the most that can be anticipated from them is avoidance of actual mistakes in identifying usage as standard or non-standard, with even this not always being possible. Their advice as to which errors should be made the focus of attention is, it seems, likely to be misleading, and much classroom work aimed at the eradication of salient errors may thus prove of rather little value, - while errors of a more serious nature may be left for the most part uncorrected.

The average classroom teacher will, of course, be even more badly placed in this respect, and may lose whatever limited confidence she may have in her ability to 'correct' her students' English. This problem could be solved only by the ready availability of suitably qualified native speakers - and a willingness to make use of their expertise, and, except in unusual cases where there was actual counter-evidence, to rely on their intuitions rather than on anyone else's.

On the other hand, if a local endonormative standard were to be developed, the need for such measures would disappear, and the main subject for concern would be the uniformity of local experts' views and their conformity with such a standard. Hong Kong students would, in other words, be attempting the much easier task of writing or speaking for an imagined local audience (albeit one with a very high educational level and high proficiency in English). However, it seems very unlikely that any such local standard will ever be set up in Hong Kong, other than on a purely *de facto* basis because of widespread ignorance of the details of the exonormative standard (see Newbrook (1988, 1989)). Reliance on local intuitions, whether they themselves are uniform or not, is likely to remain a 'second-best' only.

I want to emphasise that I am in no way criticising Tse's excellent work or, more generally, the scholarship of Hong Kong writers on English. I am merely drawing attention to a somewhat alarming fact, which - in respect of the magnitude of the Tse-Newbrook divergence - did indeed come as something of a surprise to me. More rigorous surveys are, of course, needed; and what is eventually done about this matter is, I take it, for Hong Kong people to decide - but it seems clear enough that if the Hong Kong classroom teacher and the concerned student continue to depend upon local commentators for guidance on avoiding errors they may find - as and when they come into contact with the international English-speaking community - that their work on this front has proved surprisingly and disappointingly low in 'cost-effectiveness'. How seriously this may be regarded is a matter yet to be determined.

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